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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: KURDISH PUBLIC SYMPATHETIC TO PKK
CAUSE, NOT ITS TACTICS

11. (U) This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team
cable.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Even those Iraqi Kurds who disagree with
the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) methods find it
emotionally difficult to separate the PKK cause from the
larger struggle for Kurdish rights and the hope for Kurdish
unity. There is no evidence of local wide-scale material
support to the PKK fighters encamped in the Kurdistan Region
(KR). Trapped between sympathy for the PKK's cause and
distaste for its tactics, the public tolerates the fighters'
presence. END SUMMARY.

THE PKK ISSUE

13. (SBU) The presence of PKK fighters in the KR is a major
issue in the nascent relationship between the Kurdistan
Regional Government (KRG) and the Government of Turkey (GoT).
Recent events in Erbil highlighted both the progress in
KRG-GoT relations and the strong emotional ties Kurds have
for the PKK cause. On February 14, Turkey's ruling AKP
party-aligned Abant Foundation organized a conference in
Erbil for Turkish and Iraqi-Kurdish academics on ways to
improve GoT-KRG relations. The conference was attended by
more than 150 academics and described by local press as "the
first of its kind" and indicative of "political will from
both entities to move closer and towards better
understanding." Only two days earlier, an unauthorized
pro-PKK demonstration had taken place in front of the KRG
Ministry of Human Rights, commemorating the tenth anniversary
of the arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. Demonstrators
(some from the Makhmour refugee camp) were aggressively
dispersed by Kurdish security forces.

THE FRONT-LINE: SOLDIERS AND BORDER PATROL SOUND OFF

14. (SBU) Border officials and Peshmerga commanders believe
that public opinion of the PKK varies according to proximity
to the PKK. Villagers displaced by PKK hostilities are
believed to be more hostile toward it. City-dwellers,
removed from the effects of PKK occupation, are generally
more sympathetic to the PKK cause. Particularly for Kurdish
soldiers involved in the fighting against the PKK in the 90s,
a return to armed Peshmerga confrontation with it is out of
the question.

15. (SBU) Colonel Hussein, Commander of the Dohuk Brigade of
the Iraqi Department of Border enforcement (DBE), is from one
of the areas routinely shelled by the PKK. He fought the PKK
as a Peshmerga during the period of KRG-GoT cooperation, but
now believes that military action against the PKK is both
futile and hard to sustain. The PKK's actions, he said, have
greatly worsened his life and those of his fellow villagers,
souring public opinion toward it. He acknowledged that there
"may be" some who provide material support to the PKK, but he
believes that such support is rare. Hussein's counterpart in
Sulaimaniyah, Brigadier General Amin, agrees that material

support to the PKK is rare or non-existent. He reiterated the emotional conflict that many Kurds feel toward the PKK. "We have sympathy toward them because they are Kurds, even if we disagree with their tactics and wish that they would leave Iraq."

¶6. (C) Dohuk Peshmerga Fermanda (General) Ali, commander of all Peshmerga forces in Dohuk Province, remembers when the Peshmerga and Turkish military combined forces to fight the PKK. He disagrees with Colonel Hussein's assessment of public opinion of the PKK. Ali said, "The PKK has become very skilled at combining their cause with the struggle for Kurdish rights. Besides, there are over 25 million Kurds in Turkey and all of them cannot all be terrorists." (note: QTurkey and all of them cannot all be terrorists." (note: ORA estimates the number of ethnic Kurds in Turkey to be approximately 15 million. End note.) Ali believed the people would not support direct Peshmerga military action against the PKK. "The people do not want Kurds to fight other Kurds. Our leaders will not use violence to push the PKK out. In the past, our enemies have used us against one another."

¶7. (SBU) Ali's has ordered his troops to prevent PKK fighters from seeking or receiving Iraqi support. RRTOFF was informed that those found attempting to provide such support are turned over to the Asaish (Kurdish security police). Saeed Shingari, Head of the Dohuk Division of the Asaish, says that at least two people were taken into Asaish custody in Dohuk during 2007. But neither Ali nor Shingari believe that the PKK receives much material support from Iraqi Kurds, estimating that 80% of the supplies consumed by the PKK in northern Iraq come from other PKK fighters.

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THE PEOPLE: AGAINST THEIR METHODS, NOT THEIR CAUSE

¶8. (SBU) Many residents of the KR consider the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq a costly burden, while others believe the PKK's activities are part of the greater struggle for Kurdish rights and recognition. Still others dislike the PKK altogether, but do not see anyone else standing up to Turkey on behalf of the Kurds who live there. These different beliefs are often not mutually exclusive, even in areas that have seen the worst effects of the PKK presence. As Dohuk Provincial Council Chairman Fadl Omer told RRTOff, "When I used to travel to Turkey in the 1990s, Kurds there would ask me, 'why are you killing our PKK fighters when they are fighting for Kurds?' They didn't understand that just because I don't want the PKK in our Kurdistan does not mean that I don't support the rights of Kurds in Turkey. A little of that mentality is in Iraq, too."

¶9. (SBU) Displaced villagers from the Amedi and Zakho districts of Dohuk are upset with the PKK for the havoc the group wrought on their lives. Some have been unable to return to their homes since 1992 due to PKK encampment in their areas and the resultant Peshmerga, Turkish or Iranian pursuit. But their unhappiness is not as strong as their aversion to fighting other Kurds. A 62-year-old man from Barche says, "We villagers hate PKK now. But I will never support any fight between Kurds for any reason. Any fight between Kurds will be a disaster." Many villagers still feel compassion toward the PKK, despite the harm that its occupation has done to their lives. A 54-year-old woman from the Bare Gare Area of southeastern Amedi district (which was destroyed by the PKK in 1996) reflected on the time when PKK members lived among the Iraqi-Kurdish population as friends. "We were treating them like our kids and always felt pity for them. Many times, we offered them food and they were gentle with us." "But," she continued, "after 1996, they totally changed, inflicting great violence on Iraqi-Kurds. This woman also said she would never support fighting between Kurds. A 31-year-old man from Siyare echoed the same

sentiments. Not a single villager interviewed said that they would support the use of violence against the PKK.

¶10. (SBU) Raben Rassan, Director of the NGO American Society of Kurds (ASK), believes the vast majority of the Iraqi Kurdish population sympathizes with the PKK's cause. Rassan and other contacts agree that the PKK's support grows in Turkey and Iraq every time it offers to renounce the use of violence in exchange for amnesty, only to have its offers refused by the GoT.

THE YOUTH: TERRORISTS OR FREEDOM FIGHTERS?

¶11. (SBU) With few exceptions, youth interviewed in all three KR provinces were passionately sympathetic to the PKK. (Note: Officials tell RRTOff that Kurdish youth may have romanticized views of the PKK, since very few of them have personally experienced the hardship of prolonged armed conflict. End Note) Said a fourth-year engineering student at the University of Sulaimaniyah, "their leader has been a political prisoner for ten years. They are not allowed to speak the Kurdish language or learn Kurdish history in school. They are right to fight. Turkey is forcing them to do so." Another engineering student in the same meeting described what he called the GoT's hypocrisy: "The (GoT) calls the PKK a terrorist organization. But at Davos, Turkish PM Erdogan stormed out of the meeting because he said QTurkish PM Erdogan stormed out of the meeting because he said he wanted to show solidarity for the residents of the Gaza Strip. Israel says they committed those actions against Gaza because of Hamas. Hamas . . . has used more violence than the PKK." Several students said they either would attend a PKK demonstration or had already done so.

¶12. (SBU) Students conveyed feelings of both strong solidarity with the Turkish Kurdish population -- for whom the PKK claims that it is fighting -- and conflict over whether the PKK's cause or its tactics are the more important to consider when judging the PKK. Said one first-year student at the University of Kurdistan-Hawler in Erbil, "Asking us whether we support the PKK despite their use of violence is like asking us whether we love our moms or our dads more. We do not like their tactics, but they have no other means by which to defend the rights of Kurds in Turkey." A first-year student at the University of Dohuk summarized the views of most students when he said: "Kurds are Kurds no matter where they are. I am against the PKK because they are hurting our Kurds in order to help their Kurds. But I cannot be against the Kurds whom the PKK is helping just because I do not like the PKK. Those Kurds still deserve their rights." Most students interviewed said

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that they would not support a policy that advocates force to compel PKK to leave northern Iraq.

THE KRG: PKK IS TURKEY'S PROBLEM

¶13. (SBU) The official KRG public line on the PKK is straightforward and oft repeated: The PKK is a Turkish problem. The KRG strongly disagrees with the PKK's tactics and will not offer them any assistance, but will not fight the PKK on Turkey's behalf any more. The Kurds lost 3,000 Peshmerga fighting the PKK in the nineties. The KRG believes that the solution to the PKK problem lies in diplomatic and political engagement of all involved, rather than violence and hard-line positions. KRG officials hail recent GoT overtures toward Turkish Kurds, such as a new national television station that broadcasts in Kurdish, and permission to teach the Kurdish language in Turkish universities. However, they believe that this is only the beginning of what the GoT must do to compete with the PKK message. Minister of Interior Karim Sinjari mentioned in a March 3 meeting that the KRG would be hosting a meeting of all the Kurdish parties

(in and outside Iraq) to drive home the message to the PKK that a peaceful, negotiated solution is the only answer.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) The views described above paint a clear picture of broad sympathy for the PKK as Kurds and defenders of Kurds, ambivalence or criticism of the PKK's tactics, and a rejection of further Peshmerga military action against the PKK presence in northern Iraq. In addition to the costly, failed attempt to compel the PKK to leave northern Iraq, the PUK-KDP civil war in the nineties (in which the PKK was also involved) adds to popular aversion of further fighting among Kurds. As the KRG considers how to contribute to the resolution of the PKK problem, we believe it will weigh public opinion carefully. END COMMENT
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